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AUTHOR Johnson, David K.
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ABSTRACT

Some feel that a persistent shortcoming of the collective views of human action is that they often advocate a view of the individual as merely a bearer or token for the group to which he or she belongs. These theories do not account for individual choice. This project attempts to arrive at a general critique of individualism, drawing on a number of unit ideas which are contained in the term and attempts to contrast and defend a social conception of the individual. The discussions contained in this document describe many of the epistemologial and philosophical arguments for a theory of the social construction of reality. Topics include: (1) "The Radical Constructivist Perspective"; (2) "Relativism and Objectivism"; (3) "Fallibilism, Relativism and Rationality"; (4) "The Virtuous Circle"; (5) "Adaptation and Viability"; (6) "Social Constructivism and Language"; and (7) "Applications to Social and Political Philosophy." A list of 57 references is appended. (CW)

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TOWARD A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHIC IMPLICATIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

David K. Johnson

Scientific Reasoning Research Institute
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003

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1. Introduction. This project arose out of an initial attempt to arrive at a general critique of individualism, drawing on a number of unit-ideas the term has come to conflate (namely: economic, ethical, epistemological and methodological individualism), to which I had hoped to contrast and defend a "social" conception of the individual. I have come to realize that the viability of this latter view is constrained by the extent to which it can account for individual purposes and choice. Indeed, in our efforts to understand the world there is a dialectical relationship between our purposes for studying the world and the process of hypothesis formation:

> Put simply, that relationship is that hypothetical propositions cannot be formulated without a clear set of purposes for study, but the treating of propositions as hypotheses, that is as capable of verification or falsification, is itself the activity which prevents only that knowledge being acquired which will suit the purposes of the observer. (Kitching:1988:176).1

1A concrete example of this is the Marxist tendency to talk of relations of determination holding between forms of thought and material practices, to the point where a given society or period of history receives a particular stamp as its "mode of production." Kitching comments on this conflation of our descriptions/explanations and that which they supposedly describe (all the while reinforcing the notion that such descriptions/explanations are forms of human praxis): "...that such a society has such a character, form or stamp, is not a characteristic of it as it were. It is rather a characterization of it in thought. And a society is given (actively given) such a character, as a distinct "mode of production," by being compared (this is itself an act) with societies which have preceded it or followed it....But this is always a retrospective act, and

It has been a persistent and fatal shortcoming, in my view, of some the more "collective" views of human action (expressed by, for example, so-called "scientific" socialists, structuralists, and, at times, historical materialists) that they often advocate an "expressive" theory of the individual, where individuals are merely bearers or tokens for the groups to which they belong. History, pace Louis Althusser, has no human subject: individuals -- along with their experiences, preferences and intentions -- are simply bearers of developing structures and roles. Individual choice becomes obsolete as macroscopic results of collective action are simply "secreted" into the individual when he/she is produced. (Althusser:1970). A more satisfactory account of the role of choice, notions of preference formation (both exogenous and endogenous), and internalized norms in explaining human behavior must issue from a general discussion of the proper relationship between "history" (structures, traditions, social products, etc.) and "subjectivity."[2]

Taking individual choice seriously -- as we must -- involves, to paraphrase Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, recognizing people as learners (those in the process of forming preferences, constituting,

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whether particular attention is given to the processes of material production in making such retrospective distinctions depends on the purposes of the thinker making them, on the purposes which inform his/her actions as a thinker." (Kitching:1988:30).

2I am referring to the way in which Roger Gottlieb uses these terms: "...[we] must see social life as the product of both "History" and "Subjectivity": social regularities or structures and fundamental changes in social life initiated by the consciousness and will of social agents." (Gottleib:1987:xii).

affirming themselves), and as choosers (those acting in a straightforwardly instrumental fashion to satisfy pre-given preferences). (Bowles and Gintis:1986). What it does not involve is the simple conflation of choice and preference, since these are themselves matters to be explained. Thus one often overlooked criticism of instrumental rationality associated with individualistic explanations of human behavior is that a person's choices are often incapable of "revealing" the preferences of that individual for the simple reason that those preferences are formed in the act of choosing (note the element of circularity here). As a result, a viable conception of rational action must both reject many forms of cost-benefit analysis and supplement the notion of pre-constituted preferences.

It is ironic that in their quest for "rock bottom" explanations, proponents of individualistic theories of social science that deal exclusively with explanations in terms of individuals's purposes, attitudes and beliefs, end in positing (to paraphrase Marx) an entirely abstract being "squatting outside the world;" an individual consisting merely in a certain set of invariant psychological characteristics and tendencies. Our task as Stephen Lukes has described it is to "deny the exclusivist (explanatory) claims of methodological individualism while remaining a firm believer in the importance of respecting persons." (Lukes:1970). My tack will be to argue that the individual self is not merely essentially social in its formation and nature -- its very individuality is to be seen as formed of social elements. As the Chilean "neuro-philosophers" Humberto

Maturana and Francisco Varela write:

> ...the uniqueness of being human lies exclusively in a social structural coupling that occurs through languaging, generating (a) the regularities proper to the human social dynamics, for example, individual identity and self-consciousness, and (b) the recursive social human dynamics that entails a reflection enabling us to see that as human beings we have only the world which we create with others....(Maturana and Varela:1988:246).

Such statements, in the hands of many social theorists, are all too often merely a reaction to what they view as the undesirable consequences of adopting an individualistic explanation of human activity and -- in the absence of a developed alternative theory-- are convincing only to those who are initially sympathetic. It is as if simply making the assertion "it is in the nature of humans to be social" is alone sufficient to refute individualism. Those who set out to defend a social conception of the individual are not entirely to blame, however, for the lack of precision often exhibited in this discussion. The analyses of those who would side with an individualistic explanation of human behavior (including utilitarian thinkers, liberal political theorists, and pre-Ricardian classical and neo-classical economic theorists who view social behavior as a simple maximization or minimization problem) often implicitly make reference to irreducibly social elements and thus promote perspectives that differ less radically from competing theories than one might initially suppose.3 Nevertheless, it remains true that varieties of individualistic thought still serve as particularly intractable means

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3See, for example, Roy Bhaskar who writes: "...what makes this situation particularly ironical is that the more sophisticated methodological individualists formally concede that [social] relations must play some role in explanation." (Bhaskar:1979:114).

of validating and rationalizing oppressive economic and socio-political arrangements and the associated diseconomic and undemocratic features of those arrangements. Ironies abound in the thought of liberal and conservative defenders of individualistic theories of human action. While what is extolled is the picture of autonomous profit-maximizers each free to pursue her or his own interests and prosper accordingly -- modeled after "little English shopkeepers" as Roemer has said rather nicely (Roemer:1979:766) -- it is actually the very impersonal invisible hand-like mechanisms of the marketplace, by virtue of some aggregation procedure, that receive all the credit for coordinating individual efforts into a harmonious whole. Francis Green and Bob Sutcliffe ridicule the faith of market economists in the following way:

> The automatic and impersonal nature of the market has led many people, economists included, to attach mysterious, almost omnipotent powers to it, assuming that, like a Pope, the maker is infallible and will always work to bring about a harmony and balance, even if the capitalist competition underlying it is anarchic. Their belief in the market is closer to a religious faith than to a systematic scientific analysis. It extols the positive social values of self-interest and thus defends the ownership of private property in the means of production. (Green and Sutcliffe:1987:115).

This use of individualism as simply an "apologia for the profit system" (Ibid:157) can result in the absurd situation where "market forces" -- however deleterious their effects on individuals may be-- as reflections of some sort of "higher" interest, are therefore <u>not</u> to be consciously brought under the control of the people whose very activity gave rise to them in the first place. Indeed, conscious efforts to influence exogenously the preference formation of individual consumers is viewed by the faithful as qualitatively

different from the often more effective activities of corporate advertisers who are attempting to do the very same thing. The ideology of a benign marketplace is widespread, and humans are not the only animals that suffer the consequences of such muddled thinking.4

Circumstances such as these imply a need to go beyond individualistic explanations of human social arrangements. Of course, we do not thereby find ourselves in possession of a true, or even better, "social conception of the individual." Indeed, it is not at all obvious what that would mean, and much of the literature surrounding such a reformulation of the notion of the self and of cognition fails to make clear the meaning of the foundational concepts with which they hope to persuade the reader of the efficacy of their reformulation.5

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4 Consider the differential treatment afforded the "anonymous" fluctuations of the market and the activities of the animal activists in the following discussion between native trappers and animal activists:
Activists: "We hear the figures quoted about the drop in income over the sealing import ban. As a result of that, animal protection organizations are accused of causing social and economic hardships to Native communities. What answer do you have for a fur trade which -- without any warning to the Inuit-- suddenly decided it didn't want wild-caught Arctic fox anymore, that they preferred cage-bred animals from Scandinavia? All of a sudden, for fashion or manufacturing reasons, a market that has existed traditionally is lost. The loss is, in fact, inflicted upon you by the fur trade. What's the rationalization there?"
Trapper: "There's a great difference, because in the case of switching fox, that was just a switch that took place in a market. It wasn't intentionally geared by anybody." [my underscore] (Bartlett:1988:12).

5I have in mind some of the popular interpretations of Marxian social theory that merely take it for granted that it is prereflectively obvious to those sympathetic to the socialist cause, that this movement will lead to the best of all possible worlds for humans simply because they are "social animals." While I am not disputing the accuracy of that description, it is

At the most general level my purpose in undertaking this critique of individualism and replacing that perspective with a more "social" one that issues from a version of what has come to be known as the "social construction of reality," is to explain human action and thought; or better, human action including thought. Cognition is an active affair, and the ways in which language determines our thinking and serves as a "vehicle of thought" (Wittgenstein:1953:329) come into play here. By characterizing us as merely passive agents of perception, those who emphasize the representational nature of our language overlook our active role in constructing our sensory experience.6 I will take up this essentially epistemological problem

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by no means obvious what distinctive traits of human beings are involved and, more to the point, what significance they may hold for social theory. Theories of human nature posing as timeless descriptions of the human condition have long served as means of validating particular human arrangements -- both on the Left and the Right. That universal egoism undergirds theoretical justifications of capitalist relations is obvious; what is less obvious is that leftist neglect of the human nature question has unintentionally bolstered the tiresome and uncritical conflation of Stalinism and Marxism. For a clear discussion of the "problem of human nature" see Norman Geras (1983). Also, the different "worlds" that inhabit the work of Kuhn (1964) and Feyerabend (1978) prompted by the relativization of perception have not always been used in a clear fashion. Notable exceptions include the work of Mary Hesse (1980), David Bloor (1976) and Mary Douglas (1975). As I argue below, it is my view that the most successful treatment of these and other problems connected with a social reformulation of the self issues from the perspective of "constructivism." Here the work of Von Glasersfeld, Bateson, Maturana and Varela (to name just a few) is most illustrative.

6This is also Marx's view in the Theses: all human thought is inextricably part of human activity and "the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question." (Tucker:1978:144). See also, Kitching:1988:CH I. Moreover, since I will choose to explain as well our cognitive abilities and not merely take them for granted, it will be necessary to explicate the operational foundations of rationality. To this

in the context of the objectivist-relativist debate. My analysis of the debate will lead us to walk the razor's edge between what will be shown to be two incompatible and equally untenable extremes7; while shedding some light on the theoretical bases of what one philosopher has called the "primary cultural conflicts of contemporary times."8

The introduction of irreducibly social elements into a discussion of the basis of human knowledge is, of course, nothing new. In the social sciences the debate between methodological individualism and methodological holism is only one instance of the general problem of explaining human action and thought while doing justice to two seemingly contradictory yet equally important aspects of our experience: (1) that meaning appears to be a feature of individual consciousness; and (2) that in order to understand the meanings we

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end it will be helpful to adopt Maturana's distinction between the two primary exclusive explanatory paths of transcendental objectivity ("objectivity-without-parentheses") and constituted objectivity ("objectivity-in-parentheses").

7This is Maturana's expression. A trap awaits those who fail to walk this edge: "On one side there is a trap: the impossibility of understanding cognitive phenomena if we assume a world of objects that informs us because there is no mechanism that makes that "information" possible. On the other side, there is another trap: the chaos and arbitrariness of nonobjectivity, where everything seems possible." (Maturana and Varela:1988:133).

8Bernstein:1983:xiv. In their new book Rationality and Relativism (1986), Hollis and Lukes describe the temptations of relativism in the following manner: " Other minds, other cultures, other languages and other theoretical schemes call for understanding from within. Seen from within, they make us doubt whether there is anything universal under the sun. This doubt is also a challenge to the very idea of a single world. Is not the world, as interpreted in our scheme of things, but one of many? Are not our forms of reasoning and tests of truth as parochial as any other? This is the primrose path to relativism and it is paved with plausible contentions." (p. 1).

attach to individual experiences we must have a concurrent understanding of the features of some sort of trans-individual context, not reducible to the understandings of individual actors. These, respectively, subjectivist and objectivist emphases on the locus of meaning of an utterance or action of an individual agent have given rise to numerous debates as to the methods and explanatory goals of the social sciences. The relationship between them has largely been one of rival explanatory systems, that more (objectivism) or less (subjectivism) model themselves on the format of natural scientific explanation:

> Objectivists, influenced in the main by positivism, have for the most part advocated a unity of scientific method: a methodological monism that considers the "thing language" of natural science to be applicable to any subject matter. Subjectivists are uniformly hostile to the doctrines of positivism and argue, primarily, that because of the meaningful character of human actions and products their explanation requires a unique approach, and results in different forms of knowledge. (Rubenstein:1981:9).

But these "different forms of knowledge" have too often failed to circumvent the trappings of representationalism and foundationalism. Richard Bernstein comments:

> Typically, though not universally, defenders of these other modes of knowledge and experience, whether they draw their inspiration from the classical humanistic disciplines or the tradition of practical philosophy and wisdom, have explicitly or implicitly accepted the self-understanding of the natural sciences that has been advocated by their "tough-minded" opponents. (Bernstein:1983:48).

Bernstein's call is for a more thoroughgoing analysis of the foundational (and often unacknowledged) assumptions and metaphors that inform these debates if we are to succeed in constructing a viable alternative to either objectivism or relativism. A most challenging obstacle is the fact that the debate is invariably characterized as an

"either/or" situation. Compare the implicit goals of the following two quotes, the first of which could be interpreted as having objectivistic leanings, and the second as emphasizing the necessarily subjective nature of experience:

> ...if there is no independent standard of an individual's self-interest other than those defined as values by the existing social practices in which he is engaged does this not lead to a depoliticizing relativism? (Ferguson:1985:13).

> The ideal of emancipation as community is both impossible and oppressive. Such an ideal community seeks a utopian unity of experience and self-understanding among persons. (Young:1985:12).

While these quotes torn from their context as they are leave behind the subtleties of their respective analyses, the only point I wish to make here is that one represents a search for foundational, common, identifying features of humans -- regardless of the particular "social practices in which the individual is engaged" -- and the other for those differences which make us identifiable as unique individuals. Clearly, each position gains much of its appeal only by being placed within an often unacknowledged context of an either/or: either my conception of the real situation of human beings is correct by virtue of its correctly mirroring or representing in some fashion a state of affairs "independent" of my understanding, or given the inherently perspectival nature of my views of the world, I am constitutively unable to make claims that have any relevance beyond my own experiential field.

In response to this either/or there has been a shift to an analysis of the conceptual interpenetration of the positions of subjectivism and objectivism. For instance, in reference to the "soft data" of individual intentions and the "hard data" of objective social

structure Barry Smart writes:

...the two opposing forms of analysis predicated on subjectivity and objectivity must be replaced by an alternative capable of incorporating, and allowing for, the dual nature of social reality. (Smart:1976:114).

And Bernstein suggests that a movement "beyond" objectivism and relativism is the proper response to a reflection on the evolving character of rationality:

...along with the disquietude that is provoked by these extremes, there is a growing sense that something is wrong with the ways in which the relevant issues and options are posed -- a sense that something is happening that is changing the categorical structure and patterns within which we think and act -- a sense that we have an urgent need to move beyond objectivism and relativism. (Bernstein:1983:2).

It often occurs in the either/or juxtaposition of objectivism and relativism that a careful consideration of the relative merits of either position leads one to adopt, consciously or not, assumptions which threaten to undermine one's position and thereby lead to the adoption of the rival view. Other times, we are pressed to seek refuge in some other (third) view that either takes what is best from each of the initial, antithetical perspectives or tries to shift the ground of the debate in some fashion -- often by questioning the implicit forms of rationality and tests of truth.

2. The radical constructivist perspective. Consider Nietzsche's response to Enlightenment rationalism:

What then is truth?...a sum of human relations...which after long use seem firm, canonical and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. (Quoted in Hollis and Lukes:1986:3).

This is an essentially Romantic version of the contemporary idea that

reality is a "social construct" -- an idea that compels us to "recognize at last our cognitive precariousness." (Douglas:1975:).9 I will cover in more detail below possible motivations for giving up the quest for commensuration or certainty, and outline the implications that move holds for our notions of rationality and truth. But first, given that the very idea of the "social construction of reality" often remains conceptually inaccessible, I will begin to clarify this phrase by considering the root concept of "construction." To this end I shall adopt what has come to be called a "constructivist" viewpoint. (Von Foerster (1984); Von Glasersfeld (1984); Kelly (1955)).

Epistemologically, the constructivist perspective represents a very important shift:

> The shift from knowledge-as-representation to knowledge-as-construction of reality implies an epistemological shift from the search after the "right method" for telling the true (really real) from the false (the apparently real) in what we observe, to the analysis of the operations allowing the observer to distinguish what he or she distinguishes and therefore to organize his or her own experience. (Chiari and Nuzzo:1988:92).

This shift represents a change of ground from the discovery of that which our experience is about to "the environment as we perceive it is our invention." (Von Foerster:1984:42). Ernst Von Glasersfeld (1984) characterizes this paradigm as "radical" in that it avoids resorting to a belief in a world existing independently of the "observer" (a world "in-

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9See also Berger and Luckmann (1966).

itself").10 The emphasis here is on the knowledge of knowledge, rather than, as is traditional in western philosophy, on knowledge of reality (the really real).11

In what is clearly a pragmatic turn, radical constructivists maintain that knowledge as a reflection, picture or grasp of the nature/character of an observer independent "external" world in-itself must be replaced by knowledge as that which is in some sense "viable" in relation to the experiential world of the knowing subject (Von Glasersfeld, 1984:22). In this sense the word construction is similar to cognitive "creations," or "structures that epistemic agents, given the range of present experience within their tradition of thought and

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10Or better, a community of observers. Social constructivism recognizes the essentially social nature of our situation as observers. For one thing, to say that we operate as observers is "to say that we make distinctions in language." (Maturana:1988a:26). Maturana explains the relationship between our situation as observers ("the ontology of observing") and questions about rationality and Truth: "I express this, our situation as observers, by saying: a) the observer finds itself in the praxis of living (or the happening of living or the experience) in language...; b) any explanation or description of how the praxis of living in language comes to be is operationally secondary to the praxis of living in language, even though the explanation and the description also take place in it; and c) explanations and descriptions do not replace what they explain or describe. Finally, it is apparent that if explanations and descriptions are secondary to the praxis of living of the observer (our human praxis of living), they are strictly unnecessary for it, even if the praxis of living of the observer changes after his or her listening to them. In these circumstances, observing is both the ultimate starting point and the most fundamental question in any attempt to understand reality and reason as phenomena of the human domain." (Ibid:27).

11Even the skeptics have fallen into this trap: "...the trouble was (and is) that the skeptics' arguments have always focused on the negative. By reiterating that true knowledge of the objective world is impossible, they have helped to perpetuate the idea that knowledge , in order to be any good, would have to be about the objective world." (Von Glasersfeld:1988:4).

language, consider viable." (Von Glasersfeld:1988a:7). There are key words here: "tradition" and "structures." These concepts must play a major role in any successful explication of the source and validation (or truth-value) of knowledge claims. For now I will just point out that the inclusion of these concepts, as problematic as they are for any epistemology that places such emphasis on the active cognizing of individual agents in the constitution of the "real world," should guard against any premature characterizations of a reformulated "social constructivist" position as inherently individualistic or psychologistic, in the sense that these terms imply that the theory of knowledge is intractably subjectivistic or incapable of giving account of the social/natural, shared elements of the human condition.

3. Relativism and objectivism.

a. The motivational roots of relativism. In general, the argument for relativism involves two stages: first, a defense of the position that knowledge and perception are constructive processes:

> The critical point is that all knowledge involves a framework of concepts; there is, in Quine's phrase, no "neutral cosmic exile" from which one can read off the nature of the world as it is "in itself." All knowledge is perspectival, theory-laden, dependent upon a framework of concepts which somehow allows us to sort out or organize the input. Hence there are no neutral facts, for the facts as we know them are correlative with the set of concepts we employ. (Swoyer:1982:86).

Maturana, who views the human situation as one in which human beings acting as "observers" make distinctions in language, puts it a little differently when he writes:

> ...regardless of whether we are aware of this or not, we observers never listen in a vacuum, we always apply some particular criterion of acceptability to whatever we hear (see, touch, smell...or think), accepting or rejecting it according to whether or not it satisfies

such criteria in our listening. (Maturana:1988a:28).

Second, it is assumed that there is no uniquely correct way of organizing this "input." This second step on the road to relativism "involves the Hegelian move of attacking the putative a priori character of our modes of thought." (Swoyer:1982:87). Swoyer identifies two strategies for achieving this second step. First, we might reject any correspondence theory of truth on the assumption that no neutral access to the world untinged by thought is possible, and hence all talk of correspondence of ideas with things external to our experiential field is nonsensical. Second, it is argued that "our ways of picking out and individuating things depend on our concepts, especially our sortals, and that reality, whatever it is, underdetermines the way in which we think about it." (Ibid:87).

b. <u>The Passion of the Objectivist</u>. It has been suggested that objectivism is no longer synonymous with absolutism:

> Although the quest for certainty and the search for absolute constraints continues to haunt philosophy, there is a sense in which "absolutism" to use William James' phrase, is no longer a "live" option. The dominant temper of our age is fallibilistic. If we focus on the history of our understanding of science during the past hundred years, from Pierce to Popper, or on the development of epistemology during this period, we discover that thinkers who disagree on almost everything else agree that there are no nontrivial knowledge claims that are immune from criticism. (Bernstein:1983:12).

So the point is that, in modern times at least, objectivists explicitly undertake the search for such bases of certain knowledge, all the time with an appreciation of the fallibilistic character of any particular knowledge claim. What must be explained then in order to appreciate the passion of the objectivist is not any particular instantiation of indubitable knowledge but the general thrust toward

such knowledge, as, at the very least, a temporary resting place amid the "vicissitudes that constantly threaten us." (Ibid:18). This is what Bernstein refers to a "Cartesian anxiety." In Descartes' words:

> ...Because the exigencies of action often oblige us to make up our minds before having leisure to examine matters carefully, we must confess that the life of man is very frequently subject to error in respect to individual objects, and we must in the end acknowledge the infirmity of our nature. (Ibid:18).

Again, a chilling either/or lurks in the background of objectivist attempts to place human knowledge on a firm foundation:

> Either there is some support for our being, a fixed foundation for our knowledge, or we cannot escape the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos. (Bernstein:1983:18).

In a similar view, Von Glasersfeld holds that the objectivists' persistence may best be explained psychologically as an instance of "egocentricity."

> It was, as Piaget pointed out, very difficult for mankind to relinquish the presumption that our planet should be the center of the universe. We may now add: giving up the notion that our knowledge will eventually enable us to "see" the world as it is, requires an even greater effort of decentration. (Von Glasersfeld:1984b:3).

4. <u>Fallibilism, Relativism and Rationality</u>. Once fallibility is introduced to objectivism, a new question arises, namely: what is it about our knowledge claims that admits, seemingly universally, of fallibility and does this threaten to introduce an element of relativism into the discussion? If, as a consciously fallibilistic objectivist I am prepared only to assert the probable nature of my claims to "certain" knowledge, must I not as well defend my choice of fallibilistic over absolutist objectivism? If, by fallibilistic I mean to assert that my claims to certainty are <u>always</u> open to emendation, then I must be prepared to state why this is the case.

Here, relativism threatens to undermine my objectivism. If I mean to say that my claims to certainty are only sometimes open to emendation, then I am not really advocating a fallibilistic objectivism.

As Stephen Ross has pointed out, the relativistic emphasis on undecidability and indeterminateness functions in one sense to "throw the burden of proof onto those who would establish unconditioned universals." (Ross:1988:246). Only by ignoring the evidence in favor of indeterminateness is the objectivist able to accuse the relativist of nihilism. This is not to suggest that the rejection of absolute objectivism entails the acceptance of an equally unqualified skepticism or relativism, for the latter fares no better in terms of its ability to do justice to our experience of "the indeterminateness that characterizes emergence." (Ibid:246). A universalizing or radical relativism fails for a somewhat different reason, namely, that well rehearsed charge of self-referential contradiction which has followed on the heels of relativistic thought since at least the time of Plato. As a reaction to criticisms of the "bridgehead argument" (see note 12 below) many defenses of relativism presuppose in some fashion a "localizing" or weakening of relativistic claims about the context-dependent nature of rationality and truth. An example of this can be found in the work of Chris Swoyer who begins with a "charitable" depiction of the motivation to defend relativism and ends by claiming that the strong relativist thesis is unable to make sense of its own claim that truth is relative to, for example, a "framework:"

> The general difficulty is simply that a strong version of relativism is most naturally stated, first, in terms of something that can be

shared by different frameworks and, second, in the form of the claim that this something can receive different truth-values in those frameworks. (Swoyer:1982:103).

We must assume that either different frameworks involve very different worlds or they do not. If they do, then movement from one to the other cannot unproblematically be characterized as some sort of translation between the worlds:

> ...if two allegedly different frameworks are sufficiently alike for one to be translated into the other, then they are not really distinct at all....thus a sentence S of F will not be true in F while its counterpart is false in F' simply because no counterpart of S exists in F'. On the other hand, if F and F' are sufficiently similar to contain some one thing of the sort required for translation, they will involve many of the same objects and concepts, and the picture that tempted us to view truth as relative dims. (Ibid:103).12

Ross is clearly struggling with a similar limitation to what he calls "global" relativism in his comments on Margolis' "In Defense of Relativism:"

> Unconditioned skepticism and incommensurability (the impossibility of a common measure) are incoherent to the extent that they are absolute. Local universality and indeterminateness are not, and can be construed as incoherent only from another absolute point of view. (Ross:1988:246).

Ross's "local incommensurateness" is equivalent to Swoyer's "weak Relativism." The obvious question is how do we make the notion of local or weak relativism coherent without undermining the anti-objectivist motivations with which we began? Swoyer briefly alludes to this question when he writes:

> The picture of relativism that emerges is compatible with the view that truth might be relative in a weak sense, that is, there could be

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12This major criticism of relativism is often referred to as the "bridgehead argument" for necessary assumptions of interpretation. See Lukes (1986).

things that were true in one framework which were not expressible and a fortiori not true in another. This not to say, of course, that there are alternative frameworks or that if there are there are actually things in one which resist translation into others. (Swoyer:1982:105).

The most he is willing to conclude is that "our knowledge of the world is colored by our concepts" -- a claim that would not a priori be rejected by many who would call themselves objectivists. Carl Kordig, for example, argues for the position that it is possible to maintain both that some "observational results are theory-neutral and that there are no data without concepts." (Kordig:1971:ix). He suggests that Feyerabend's "theoretical pluralism" -- on the understanding that pluralism is an essential feature of all knowledge for those who argue for incommensurability -- is actually rendered impossible by the adoption of "radical meaning variance."

If radical meaning variance indeed occurred in a particular scientific transition then no evidence for it from this sort of argument could exist. That is T and T', being theoretically and observationally incommensurable, could have neither mutually contradictory basic principles nor mutually inconsistent consequences in any domain. (Ibid:55).

Like Swoyer, Ross wants to make local relativism (and even skepticism and incommensurabilism) an attractive and coherent alternative to globalizing or absolute relativism. His is a call for a "more reflexive view of both relativism and locality, including the locality of locality and the relativity of relativism." (Ross:1988:245). He thinks Margolis is correct in saying that "it is false to suppose that denying the admissibility of bipolar truth values [as does the form of relativism that Margolis wants to defend] ...just is an expression of skepticism: on the contrary, it is itself

a strong cognitive claim." (Quoted in Ross:1988:246). Margolis claim is correct, according to Ross, to the extent that a relativistic claim can be interpreted "not to deny knowledge, but to assert it." (Ibid:246). Ross goes even further and adds that skepticism and incommensurabilism can be similarly interpreted. Ross is well aware of the implications of this relativization of relativism, namely, that if relativistic assertions are to be interpreted as "strong cognitive claims," and not merely as self-contradictory claims, then implicit in the relativists' assertions is a <u>different sense of reason and validation of knowledge claims</u>. For relativists to be overly concerned about the self-referential problems connected to incommensurabilism (or, as Swoyer would have it, intranslatability)

> plays into the traditional modern practice of regarding epistemic legitimation to fall within the province of science. Historically speaking, the thesis of incommensurability belongs to the struggle of the humanities and social sciences against the hegemony of the natural sciences. (Ross:1988:245).

Accordingly, criticisms of relativism will succeed or fail depending on whether it is appropriate or not to apply nonrelativistic paradigms of rationality, argumentation and justification to the relativist's position. For it is possible that the evidence necessary to convince another of the truth of relativism need only be true relative to those who find themselves agreeing with it. This is apparently the view of Meiland and Krausz who write:

> To insist that the relativist should have the same purposes in argument as the nonrelativist might have is misguided. It is an example of a practice often followed by absolutist objectors to relativism -- the practice of requiring the relativist to adopt ends and to satisfy standards which are appropriate to absolutism and then declaring relativism refuted when relativism fails to live up to the

mark. (Krausz and Meiland:1982:33).

In other words, we have, in a rather circuitous fashion, returned to the initial question of transcending the objectivist-relativist duality, only this time in terms of new "forms of reason and validation." (Ross:1988:245). Just what these new forms may look like and how one might make the switch are further questions. At this point we should note that all talk of "relativizing relativist claims" or advocating an incommensurabilism that "recognizes the cultural authority of its own voice" entails both local universality and local indeterminateness.

The common denominator of these debates appears to be some form of pragmatism. Ross, in a pragmatic moment, refers to the struggle between objectivism and relativism as one in which either side attempts to "throw the burden of proof onto those who would establish a privileged method or voice." (Ross:1988:246). Others refer to the problem in similar terms. Nicholas Rescher's pragmatic alternative to relativism depicts competing views of the world in terms of their "pragmatic efficacy." (Rescher:1980:342). And Maturana's constructivist approach to cognition leads him to define cognition as "effective action," that is, action that permits a living being (in this case a human being) to continue its existence in a particular environment as it "brings forth its world." (Maturana and Varela:1988:29). The important point for my purposes is the following. If I am to take seriously the notion of epistemic agents constructing reality, then objectivism no longer remains an option for me. On the other hand, my depiction of the initial motivations to

adopt a relativist position demand the adoption of a constructivist position.13

So it is then necessary to defend this position from the self-referential problems we have been discussing. I suggested at the outset that there was something about the two extreme positions of absolutist objectivism and radical relativism that, when loosened a bit to comport to our experience of the world, seemed to lead us to accept premises more in line with the position opposed to the one we initially supported. In the case of objectivism this occurs in the context of loosening or qualifying the universalistic claims of the theory, making it, as we have said, more fallibilistic, with the concomitant problem of having to give an account of those aspects of our experience that promoted us to undertake this qualification, and to which the validity of our account of experience has now become relativized. In the case of relativism, in order to answer charges of self-referential inconsistency, a localizing of relativist claims, and with that a local determinateness as well, either fails according to established cannons of rationality to avoid inconsistency or becomes indistinguishable from many varieties of objectivism.

5. The virtuous circle. The epistemological shift mentioned at the

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13 This is the case with Belenky et al in their work Women's Ways of Knowing where they interpret relativism in a way that is clearly indebted to Piagetian constructivist thought: "It is only with the shift into full relativism that the student completely comprehends that truth is relative, that the meaning of an event depends on the context in which that event occurs and on the framework that the knower uses to understand that event, and that relativism pervades all aspects of life....Only then is the student able to understand that knowledge is constructed, not given; contextual, not absolute; mutable, not fixed." (Belenky:1988:10).

outset, from knowledge-as-representation to knowledge-as-construction offers unique solutions to the questions surrounding self-reference and will serve as my starting point in a discussion that will at the same time offer a justification for this particular method of inquiry, as well as address questions surrounding the context-dependent nature of rationality and truth. Giving up the rational bridgehead -- the allegedly unique common core of belief shared by all cultures-- threatens to place us in a situation where our "justifications will begin to run in a circle and assume what they were meant to justify." (Barnes and Bloor:1986:27). The only way around this dilemma, which parallels the localizing of relativist claims mentioned above, is in fact to embrace closure (recursion) and self-reference as necessary features of the epistemological turn which constructivism represents. This is Von Foerster's "curved space" of human experience of the world and of ourselves:

> The realization that the observer, the observed phenomenon and the process of observation itself form a totality, which can be decomposed into its elements only on pain of absurd reifications, has far-reaching implications for our understanding of man and his problems-- especially of the ways in which he literally "constructs" his reality, then reacts to it as if it existed independently of him "out there," and eventually may arrive at the startling awareness that his reactions are both the effect and the cause of his reality construction. (Segal:1986:xvi).

Maturana and Varela describe this unavoidable element of circularity in adopting a starting point for theory as a consequence of the "unbroken coincidence of our being, our doing, and our knowing." (Maturana and Varela:1988:24). Although the processes involved in our activities constitute our knowledge, we have no choice but to call on these very processes in order to talk about how we

know. This is the case because what we do is inseparable from our experience of the world:

> I shall start from two unavoidable experiential conditions that are at the same time my problem and my explanatory instruments, namely: a)that cognition, as is apparent in the fact that any alteration of the biology of our nervous system alters our cognitive capacities, is a biological phenomenon that must be explained as such; and b) that we, as is apparent in this very same essay, exist as human beings in language using language for our explanations. These two experiential conditions are my starting point because I must be in them in any explanatory attempt; they are my problem because I choose to explain them; and they are my unavoidable instruments because I must use cognition and language in order to explain cognition and language. (Maturana:1988:4).

This "virtuous circle" is unappealing to those steeped in the traditions of dualistic, "either/or" thought. Any movement beyond objectivism and relativism, it should be clear at this point, presupposes a rejection of all unmediated dualities (mind/body, inner/outer, subject/object, rationality/emotion, materialism/idealism, etc). What is interesting about this line of attack is that it is coterminous with some of the more sophisticated versions of feminist and Marxist thought.14 In fact, the epistemological/methodological implications of a social constructivist answer to the questions raised above, when applied to feminist and Marxist thought,

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14For example, Rubenstein (1981) exposes the dualist conception of mind which both objectivistic and subjectivistic social science share; Kitching (1988) advocates an explicitly non-dualist interpretation of the "philosophy of praxis" in Marx; and despite a realist rendering of the role of science (to "grasp the underlying causal determinants of our natural/social surround"(p.29)) Sandra Harding (1985) argues that the "androcentric" character of patriarchal thought is systematically masked by a series of strict dualities -- nature/culture, body/mind, private/public -- where the former element of each duality represents a "disorder." (Ibid:10). On the requirement that Marxists take a feminist turn, see Gottlieb (1986). See also, Cutler, et al., (1978).

may serve also to solve some the perennial puzzles and dilemmas which typically attach to these intellectual traditions. (This is especially the case with Marxism, where realist renderings of the theory have in the main made things worse). And to the extent that such theories present mind as a property of action and meaning as a feature of a system of collective practices they can help to provide a needed corrective to the individualizing tendency of that form of constructivism which neglects the necessarily social component of all observation. This can be accomplished, moreover, without the objectivistic reification of the social order that is found in for example, structuralism, for this social context is <u>itself</u> a human construction.

I must note at this point that there are many examples of recent Marxist scholarship, predicated on a rejection of a realist ontology and, quite often advocating some kind of philosophy of "internal relations" that do <u>not</u>, on balance, represent a clarification of Marx's epistemology. For Bertell Ollman, for example, Marx presents us with a "picture of reality" as an "organic whole;" where "nothing is logically independent of anything else." (Ollman:1971:53). In our analysis of society there is no room in Marx's picture, therefore, for a strict separation of cause and effect: when we single out one factor as a "determining" one, we are pointing to that factor which (in a particular context) is the relation that in all probability will best assist our understanding of the relevant features of the object of our analysis. For example, the concept of capital includes components which we ordinarily believe to be external to it, such as property,

wage-labor, workers, etc. But, pace Ollman, all these factors are co-elements in a single structure which we can understand only by investigating the relationships between the components. Marx's problem, then, is not how to combine separate factors or to explain causal mechanisms operating in society, but to "individuate instrumental units in a social whole which finds expression everywhere." While much of this is potentially consistent with contemporary non-dualist thought, it errs in its talk about human society as an (evolving) "organic whole." Such a comparison (of human social systems with living organisms) inevitably leads to a distortion of the features proper to the components of each system. This is because organisms, qua metacellular systems, possess operational closure in the reciprocal structural relations between their component cells:

> The central feature in the organization of an organism lies in its manner of being a unity in an environment wherein it must operate with stable properties that permit it to conserve its adaptation, whatever the properties of its components may be. (Maturana and Varela:1988:198).

In the case of human social systems, while there is operational closure in terms of the structural coupling of its components, an essential difference attaches to the fact that such systems exist also as unities <u>in the realm of language</u>. Maturana comments:

> Just as organisms require nonlinguistic structural coupling between their components, human social systems require components structurally coupled in linguistic domains, where they (the components) can operate with language and be observers. Consequently, essential to the operation of an organism is the organism itself; from it results limitation of the properties of its components. On the other hand, central to the operation of a human social system is the linguistic domain that its components generate and the extension of their properties -- a condition necessary for the embodiment of language, which is their realm or domain of existence. (Ibid:198-9).

In short, in the case of the organism, its constituent components exist for, and are restricted by that organism; while in the case of a human social system which is just the expression of the creative activity of its components, that system exists for the components. (Ibid: 199). If this criticism holds, then such a philosophy of internal relations stands in need of radical reformulation of the central guiding metaphor of that perspective (human society as an evolving organic, totality of relations) prior to its being of service to the social theorist who intends to give a convincing account of the specific nature of human social systems.

While at first glance it may appear that the work of Dilthey, given his emphasis on understanding and interpretation in the human sciences and his reliance on the concept of a "hermeneutic circle" may be more consistent with our approach, a closer look reveals that, along with realist assumptions, Dilthey stills works with the "inner/outer" dichotomy in defining understanding: "we call the process by which we recognize some inner content from signs received by the senses understanding." (Dilthey:1979:248).

A more consistent rendering of the "problem of interpretation," I suggest, would be more radical in its admission of the fundamental "groundlessness" of our experience. (I take this to be similar, if not equivalent, to whatever it is about our understanding of the human situation that requires entering a "circle" of interpretation). Such antifoundationalism reveals the poverty of the tradition that would

have it that experience is either subjective or objective.15 For it shows that

> ...reality is not just constructed at our whim, for that would be to assume that there is a starting point we can choose from: inside first. It also shows that reality cannot be understood as given and that we are to perceive it and pick it up, as a recipient, for that would also be to assume a starting point: outside first. (Varela:1984:322).

Like Dilthey, Varela invokes the concept of interpretation in understanding our experience, but this time from a non-dualist perspective:

> ...when we follow the guiding thread of circularity and its natural history, we may look at that quandary from a different perspective: that of participation and interpretation, where the subject and object are inseparably meshed. This interdependence is revealed to the extent that nowhere can I start with a pure account of either one, and wherever I choose to start is like a fractal that only reflects back precisely what I do: to describe it. By this logic, we stand in relation to the world as in a mirror that does not tell us how the world is: neither does it tell us how it is not. It reveals that it is possible to be the way we are being, and to act the way we have acted. It reveals that our experience is viable. (Ibid:322).

6. Adaptation and viability. This pragmatic emphasis on viability is the consistent outcome of taking seriously that second feature mentioned above of the motivational disposition of the relativist conjoined with a constructivist understanding of cognition. That is, the Hegelian notion of evolving categories of thought involves, as does the idea of biological forms of evolution, a notion of

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15Again, in Rorty's words, the rejection of the Great Mirror of Nature need not lead to a fatal case of Cartesian anxiety; the key is to recognize that nominalization is at work here in our treatment of "truth" as a commodity or as designating some kind of static, objective correlation obtaining between the "inner" and the "outer." (Madison:1988:19-23 and Segal:1986:33-34). It would be better, as Madison suggests, to speak adverbially of active agents being "in the truth" or "in the untruth." (Ibid:22).

adaptation.

The work of Von Glasersfeld is useful in clarifying the notions of adaptation and viability and their relationship to evolutionary thought. First, Von Glasersfeld's motivation in discussing the concept of adaptation follows from the epistemological turn mentioned above from knowledge-as-representation to knowledge-as-construction, in that he is then in need of criteria with which to assess knowledge claims that do not make reference to how well or poorly such claims "mirror" or reflect the qualities of a subject-independent world. Of course, the rejection of representationalism does not entail the <u>denial</u> of an ontological reality -- "it merely denies the human experiencer the possibility of acquiring a "True" representation of it." (Von Glasersfeld:1988b:88). It is often objected to this line of reasoning that the "independence of reality" must be invoked to explain -- at the very least -- our apparent inability to do "whatever we please." For example Andrew Collier, in arguing for the position that the distinctions of science are <u>real</u> distinctions (that is, distinctions that reflect the real structure of a mind-independent world), writes:

> ...an unknowable universe...could not have given rise to beings who can achieve knowledge, and who depend for their survival on such knowledge. In an unknowable universe, there would be no knowing subjects to know that it is unknowable. (Collier:1979:85).

The constructivist, who remains agnostic about the possibility of a mind-independent order, must maintain that while it is possible that the subject may come into contact with such a world when our actions or thoughts "fail" in some sense,

> ...in any such failure there is no way of deciding whether the lack of

success is due to an insufficiency of the chosen approach or to an independent ontological obstacle. What we call knowledge, then, is the map of paths of action and thought which, at that moment in the course of our experience, has turned out to be viable for us. (Von Glasersfeld:1988b:86-87).16

Gregory Bateson supplied the key to understanding the theory of evolution as a cybernetic theory based on the concept of constraint, and not, as many would have it, on the concept of causation:

We speak of "adaptation," and the idea of causation seems to become associated with that concept so that we end up believing that environmental constraints can cause certain biological structures or certain behaviors in organisms. (Von Glasersfeld:1987:138).

The misconception here is that the environment determines how any particular organism manages to "squeeze by" the constraints which the environment poses. (Ibid:138). Viable organisms are just those which have managed to survive, by whatever means: "...for all we know, there is an infinite variety of solutions for survival, an infinite number of ways of being viable." (Ibid:138). It makes no sense therefore, to say that the viability of an organism is a function of how well that organism "matches" the "real" qualities of its environment.

Similarly, our constructs are viable to the extent that they survive our attempts to assimilate our experience to them. And, as I have maintained, the meaning of "survival" in the realm of experience and knowledge will vary according to the purposes involved. Indeed, the very "constraints" of experience -- as Piaget argued -- may be products of our own constructive activity. (Ibid:139).

7. Social Constructivism and Language. It has been said that

16This is very close to the spirit of Marx's "new materialism" outlined in his "Theses on Feuerbach." (Tucker:1978:143-145).

Wittgenstein helped "liberate" the theory of knowledge in the western philosophical tradition when he pointed to the distinction between showing and telling. (Von Glasersfeld:1986:65). The significance of this distinction for our analysis is clear. As Robert Ackermann writes:

> Philosophy often results from an impulse to say what can only be shown, to attempt to articulate internal connections between language and the world. We learn what names stand for by mastering language in use, not by finding links between it and an external reality. Philosophy, in attempting to fill such blanks, offers a pretentious and misleading restatement of what we must already know. (Ackermann:1988:96).

Does radical relativism or subjectivism threaten to undermine an epistemology that incorporates this distinction? Ackermann maintains that Wittgenstein's language game analysis need not lead to an "unbridled" (or radical) relativism:

> When people disagree, we cannot conclude that they are participating in different language games. Language games and their horizons must be interwoven into the fabric of an entire way of life that will typically involve at least some clear factual assertions with any area of language usage. Not everything that is collectively intonated or written makes sense, because of the requirement that it interweave with a way of life. Ibid:30).

Of course, the problem here is that thought is no longer capable of being in any sense creative; our linguistic resources, when used properly, are an infallible source of understanding of various language games and their related practices:

> Language games that are alternatives to those that currently exist are described in our language, even if they suggest alternative language games and alternative practices....The potential resources of our language are sufficient to reach understanding with other human beings, even if at first they are difficult for us to comprehend. (Ibid:218).

Or as Wittgenstein writes:

> A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it for it lay

in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. (Wittgenstein:1953:115).

This objectivistic side of Wittgenstein belies his presupposition of only one "form of life," "City," "actual language," or a system of common human behavior that ultimately gives rise to at best "an assemblage of mutually consistent language games." (Ackermann:1988:224). Once again, neither the relativistic nor the objectivistic interpretation of Wittgenstein's thought seems capable of giving a full account of "forms of life;" rather, both extremes seem to point in an other, more pragmatic direction.17 A non-dualist, social constructivist account of persons will include the following themes: (1) a concept of human beings as essentially "those creatures

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17Kitching notes a parallel limitation in the application of Wittgenstein's thought to social theory, where in the case of Marxism, that theory comes to represent a "picture of reality" which holds us "captive" by its being repeated inexorably in the "language of Marxism" until there seemed to be no escape from it. (Kitching:1988:187). In light of various recent attempts to either combine Wittgenstein and Marx (Rubenstein:1981) or Wittgenstein and political theory (Pitkin:1972 in which she uses the investigations to "ground a form of relativism in which the meaning of assertions can always be relativized to language games" (Ackermann:1988:28)), it is tempting to turn to Wittgenstein for some answers to the epistemological and social questions I have been discussing. Of course, in the former case, we must take care not to loose what is distinctively a part of Marx's or Wittgenstein's thought in any attempt to bring the two together; and in the latter case, as Ackermann has pointed out, while Wittgenstein's account of knowledge does seem to have an irredeemably social aspect, the static nature of social life in his thought make it problematic for it to supply sophisticated foundations for social theory. (Ibid:221). This of course does not preclude there being much value to juxtaposing thinkers in this fashion, to move with their help toward an understanding of the more obvious and significant "seams in the web of language." (Ibid:224).

who act;"18 (2) the pragmatic idea that human subjectivity and consciousness, pace Wittgenstein and Marx, can only appear in human activity; that is, mind as a feature of action; and (3) given (1) and (2): a concept of persons as social beings and human consciousness as a product of social experience.

It is my view that Maturana's analytical reinterpretation of the notions of language and cognition will go a long way towards answering some of the questions posed above. While this is neither the place to present (in any more detail than I already have) Maturana's ideas nor to outline further the connections between my "social constructivist" perspective and those ideas, I would like to make the following points. I have suggested that the observer has no operational basis upon which to make any claims about "things" (objects or relations) as if they existed independently of what the observer does. I have also maintained that this need not be an "idealistic" or solipsistic position to take. Constructivists do not deny Reality -- that is clear, and relatively easy to say. But a question persists: what is the ultimate medium in which the constructivist constructs his/her reality? It does seem reasonable to ask for a "substratum" independent of the observer that serves as the setting for all this constructive activity. Here is Maturana's response:

> ...although it is an epistemological necessity to expect such a substratum, we constitutively cannot assert its existence through distinguishing it as a composite entity and thereby characterize it in terms of components and relations between components. In order to do so, we would have to describe it, that is, we would have to bring it

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18This is precisely the way in which Marx escapes both Hegelian idealism and Feuerbachian materialism. See Kitching (1988) chapter I.

forth in language and give it form in the domain of recursive consensual coordinations of actions in which we exist as human beings. However, to do so would be tantamount to characterizing the substratum in terms of entities (things, properties) that arise through languaging, and which, as consensual distinctions of consensual coordinations of actions, are constitutively not the substratum. (Maturana:1988b:46-47).

"Languaging" the substratum would mean to get outside of language. Just as our epistemology (based on distinctions made by observers) forces us to talk about the substratum (that which grounds distinguishability), we must concomitantly hold that no "thing" exists in the substratum:

All that we can say ontologically about the substratum that we need for epistemological reasons, is that it permits what it permits, and that it permits all the operational coherences that we bring forth in the happening of living as we exist in language. (Maturana: 1988b:47).19

The explanatory power of social constructivism derives from its analysis of the necessary connections between our forms of social praxis and our philosophical ideas. It is a position that clearly owes much to those who recognize in various ways the basic interpenetration of mind and society.20 My approach, to paraphrase Karl Mannheim, is not to relate two separate sets of objects (the social and the mental) but to "help visualize their often concealed identity." (Mannheim:1956:44). A fully developed "social

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19I believe this is what Edmond Wright means by "materia prima." (Wright:1986:15). If I am right then the position I am adopting is, quite interestingly, consistent with Wright's synthesis of Bogdanov and Lenin.

20I will include here Marx, Wittgenstein and to various degrees those who support a "sociology of knowledge." This latter group includes Karl Mannheim (1956), G.H. Mead (1964) and more recently, Barnes and Bloor (1986).

constructivist" position will possess important advantages over both a "sociology of knowledge" which is often insufficiently "radical" in its implicit understanding of the very idea of construction, and radical constructivism which, in its determination to underline the "subjective" nature of (individual) human experience, overlooks the essentially social nature of that experience.

8. Applications to Social and Political Philosophy.

a. Identity and Difference. In her paper "Elements of a Politics of Difference" Iris Young suggests that "...there is no point of view of humanity in general and the attempt to speak from such a point of view betrays the bias and particular experience of the group that speaks it." (Young:1985:11). Similarly, Robert Wolff has called attention to Dilthey's assertion that "human time unlike the time of natural events, is anisotropic and perspectival." (Wolff:1985). The perspectival character of the human world means that it exists and is known from the point of view of the agent; that our purposes and evaluative attitudes constitute, at least in part, the structure of that world. Dilthey's perspectivism enjoins us to give up the search for a transhistorical, objective standpoint from which to explain or interpret human events independently of the narrative perspective or standpoint in which we are located.21 In other words, once we assert

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21The hermeneutical dimension of truth in our construction of knowledge will lead us to consider the role of narrative: "We are in the truth when...our narratives are such as to contain a significant amount of on-going coherence,...when in our rewritings and retellings, we are able to preserve and take up, in a more meaning-giving way, with greater subtlety of narrative, the "truth" of our past...." (Madison:1988:22). And Wolff suggests that all criteria of the acceptability or "truth" of a narrative are simply forms of the struggle for control over the

difference, we have shattered the assumption of "a universal, neutral or normal point of view." (Young:1985:5).

On many occasions the assertion of group difference clearly does challenge dominant assumptions about the neutrality of standards according to which we evaluate individuals and their actions. To stress specificity over generalization or difference over identity is often to relativize what many people consider to be normal or neutral. But if difference is inevitable and primary then from what overarching perspective does the relativist suggest that the only way to transcend particular interests is to stress difference? Again, potential problems of self-reference surface here; one must identify the objectivistic presuppositions of the most common objections22 to "conceptual relativism"23 (that form of relativism that is most commonly found in post-objectivist social theories) in order to explain the motivation to move beyond the objectivist-relativist debate on the part of philosophers who -- for reasons of a practical-moral nature -- advise against a hasty acceptance of the either/or situation. It is clear that the transcendence of this duality is not simply a theoretical problem, but a practical and moral task as well.

"narrative voice." (Wolff:1985:12).

22I have in mind, for instance, Mandelbaum:1982.

23The modern cognitive relativist's notion of conceptual relativism holds that: "Assertions are relative to the intellectual or conceptual background which the individual brings to his problems from the cultural milieu to which he belongs." (Meiland and Krausz:1982:30). Philosophers often refer to this situation as one in which people are operating with different "conceptual schemes." (Rescher:1980:323)

One clear example of the struggle over the narrative voice is the debate between libertarian and radical feminists.24 Focusing on similar data, both groups tend to formulate incompatible ideal-typical constructs and prescriptions for what might constitute the best feminist practices. Must one then invoke the idea of alternative conceptual schemes in order to explain these conflicting interpretations of the same data? Once again, given the apparently self-denying character of his or her argument it is not obvious how the relativist can muster evidence for the existence of radically different schemes: for it is clearly the case that "to move from one conceptual scheme to another is in some way to change the subject." (Rescher:1980:329)

As I indicated above, to say that the relativist's position is self-refuting is to impose a particular understanding of the purposes involved in giving arguments. But my constructivist understanding of the human situation suggests that, contra Kant whose transcendental turn leaves conceptual schemes forever fixed and universal (Kant:1966:122), none of the categories of human thought exists a priori. Thus we must conclude that the objectivist's notion of rationality is closed to the truth of relativism, and is constitutively unable to recognize the potential role of an alternative conceptual schemes as a <u>regulative</u> one that in the context of conflicting theses prompts us to regard our position as fallible. The pragmatic turn implied by the reformulation of knowledge-as-

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24See, for example, Vance and Snitow:1985 and Philipson:1985.

construction will make it possible to disentangle the legitimate insights derivable from the very idea of conceptual schemes from what appears to be self-inconsistent assertions on the part of conceptual relativists.25 By focusing on the practical aspect of our cognitive endeavors we come to recognize the existence of alternative conceptual schemes by what they do.

With a clear understanding of the regulative nature of alternative schemes in hand it becomes clear that the objectivist emphasis on the "common part" of all such schemes merely reflects the positivistic hope that once and for all we can determine what is to count as the foundation stone for all "legitimate" discourse. The antifoundationalism of Richard Rorty rightly calls for the "deconstruction" of all the pretensions of philosophic discourse which attempt to construct a permanent, ahistorical foundation for theory; for all such attempts are never more than contingent human projects which reflect a moral-practical vision of the human situation "under-a-given-description." (Rorty:1979:377). This hopefully will serve as a brief introduction to the context of a social constructivist answer to the problem of difference.

b. The Rationality Debates. In his The Logic of Collective Action

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25As I noted above, the argument against relativism rests on the assumption that it is possible to point out a distinct scheme only when it is translatable into our own language. However, if the translation succeeds it is no longer a radical alternative. I will argue that the focus on translation is misguided and that interpretation is the key -- a looser sort of "reinterpretative reconstruction" that allows us to make sense of an alternative scheme. (Rescher:1980:377). In other words, explanatory conjecture and imputation are at work when we attribute an alternative scheme to others.

Mancur Olson, basing his analysis on an individualistic theory of utility maximization, demonstrates that uncoerced, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests. (Olson:1965:1-2). By taking up a comparison of each individual's costs and/or risks of engaging in collective action with the marginal difference that action will make given everyone else's actions, Olson suggests that such participation is irrational. Moreover, this position entails the rationality of taking a "free ride" on the efforts of others and is potentially devastating for the liberal model of political action. Indeed, the free rider problem threatens to undermine the basic mechanisms of representative democracy:

> Clearly the costs of voting in terms of time and energy spent on the process, as well as that expended in obtaining the information necessary for reasoned choice, will generally exceed the expected contribution of one person's vote to the probability of a favorable outcome of an election. (Bowles and Gintis:1986:137).

More importantly, for my purposes at least, it has been suggested that any "collective" or "social" theory of action will fare no better in its ability to overcome problems of social coordination. Bowles and Gintis, for example, have recently claimed that a Marxist theory of collective action is "no more capable of dealing with the new free rider problem than is its liberal adversary." (Ibid:148).

It is possible that these conclusions are unwarranted and that a Marxist conception of collective action, properly stated, is capable of handling Olson's objection. First of all, it is clear that these are issues that emerge from a debate which primarily consists in explanations of collective action based on an <u>instrumental theory of</u>

rational action. Following a discussion of the often unexamined presuppositions of the individualist model of rational agency, one might consider rejecting Olson's position in favor of one based on an alternative notion of rationality that does not require the a priori irrationality of collective action.

Typically there are three potential solutions to such "free rider" (or prisoner's dilemma) problems, of which the third is most promising. They are: (1) Show that no public goods problem exists; that is, show the irrelevance of the various conditions of a public good to the situation of, for example, workers under advanced capitalism. (2) Show that it is at least solvable in the case of the workers by relying on (a) coercion; (b) in-process benefits of collective action; or (c) moral/juridical principles that guard against free-riders. And (3) critique the whole enterprise, in particular the model of individual utility maximization as involving only one of many possible notions of rationality.26

The social philosopher Nancy Holmstrom has written that "rational behavior for an individual is necessarily collective behavior." (Holmstrom:1983:322). What may initially appear as simply an avoidance of the problem of the individual altogether becomes much more plausible when, from a social constructivist perspective, we

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26Here one would be arguing against methodological individualists like Jon Elster who would prefer to regard this option as the assumption that actors do not always behave in a rational manner. (Elster:1986:212). However, it is not at all obvious that labeling deviations from the instrumental model "irrational" is -- as Elster claims -- more "parsimonious" than questioning the implicit assumptions of that model when it fails to account for actual behavior.

realize that the "compelling power of reason that we live in our rational lives is social." (Maturana:1988a:43). The non-rational roots of all notions of rationality consist in

our implicit a priori adoption of the constitutive premises that specify the operational coherences of the conversational domains in which we accept the arguments that we consider rationally valid. (Ibid:43).

Once again we are faced with "struggles for control over the narrative voice" (Wolff:1985) - only this time in the language of alternative domains of rationality:

all that we can do in a conversation in which there is no previous implicit agreement is to seduce our interlocutor to accept as valid the implicit premises that define the domain in which our argument is operationally valid. (Maturana:19881:43).

Most succinctly, the task here is to construct a viable notion of "collective rationality" -- for the idea that rationality inheres exclusively to individual behavior and only derivatively to collective action may be -- to borrow Marx's phrase -- one of the more persistent illusions of our epoch.

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